



The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat
Le Secrétariat à la littératie et à la numérisation

Unlocking Potential for Learning

Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française du Centre-Est

Unlocking Potential for Learning

Effective District-Wide Strategies
to Raise Student Achievement
in Literacy and Numeracy

Case Study Report
Conseil des écoles catholiques
de langue française du Centre-Est

Series Editors:
Carol Campbell
Michael Fullan
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PREFACE

Schools and school systems all across the world are seeking ways of improving student achievement to respond to the growing public recognition of the importance of education for individual and societal progress and success. Ontario has adopted an exciting approach to supporting school improvement that is research and evidence based. Unlike many jurisdictions around the world that have adopted simplistic practices, Ontario has recognized that sustained improvement depends on schools, districts, and provinces adopting an aligned approach that builds the capacity of teachers, school leaders, boards, district leaders, parents, and community allies. Ontario is putting that approach into practice in elementary schools through the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and Secretariat, and in secondary schools through the Student Success Strategy. In both strategies, the Ministry of Education is closely working with schools and school districts to develop common approaches to meaningful change focused on improved school and classroom practices. We recognize that within these broad parameters there can be many different ways to proceed, taking into account the diverse demographics and contexts of Ontario schools. The initial evidence is that these strategies are working. All the indicators of student progress are improving, and there is a renewed sense of energy and optimism in schools about the future. At the same time, we recognize that we are only at the beginning of the road.

The case studies in this collection illustrate the terrific work being done in boards as well as the significant challenges that must be addressed. The researchers and authors describe in detail the strategies being used by boards to create enthusiasm, to build teacher skills, to develop strong leadership, to involve the community, and to use data to guide improvement. They show that improvement must always be a collective effort no matter how significant a role some individuals may play. They show that the school cannot do it alone although the school must also be committed to the possibility of improvement. They show the importance of tenacity and, as Robert Slavin put it, "the unrelenting pursuit of success for students."

The cases in the *Unlocking Potential for Learning* series also show that while this great work is going on boards and schools must also manage a diverse range of other tasks and pressures. The realities of day-to-day schooling and board management cannot be left unattended either. It is indeed a fine balancing act, but these very diverse cases show how it can be – is being – done. They provide inspiration, ideas, and a map of sorts for other school leaders while also making it clear that the route will look a little different in each situation.

I am honoured to write some words of introduction to this collection, but even more to work with Ontario educators and communities for the benefit of our children. No cause is more worthy of our effort.

Ben Levin

Deputy Minister of Education
September, 2006

INTRODUCTION

This publication contains a case study of a district in Ontario, Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française du Centre-Est, that is demonstrating strategies to achieve district-wide improvement in literacy and numeracy at the elementary school level. This is one of eight case studies from the Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy research project conducted by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. In this introduction, we put the case studies in context. First, we outline the provincial commitment and strategy for raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Second, we describe the Effective District-Wide Strategies project, from which this case is derived, and highlight the overall findings from this project.

In 2003, as part of a new government initiative, Ontario launched a major province-wide strategy to achieve substantial improvements in student achievement in literacy and numeracy. The starting point for reform was a five-year period of limited improvement in the percentage of 12-year-old students (Grade 6) achieving proficiency in literacy and numeracy, based on provincial assessments as carried out by the independent agency – the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). A key element of the government's strategy included the establishment of The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to work in partnership with school districts and schools to support improvement in student achievement. Nine key strategies have underpinned the Secretariat's work:

1. Work with school boards to set achievement targets.
2. Assemble and support teams at all levels to drive continuous improvement in literacy and numeracy.
3. Reduce class sizes in the primary grades to a maximum of 20 students per class by 2007–08.
4. Build capacity to support student learning and achievement.
5. Allocate resources to support target setting and improvement planning for literacy and numeracy.

6. Mobilize the system to provide equity in student outcome.
7. Embark on a process of community outreach and engagement to build support for the literacy and numeracy initiative.
8. Demonstrate a commitment to research and evidence-based inquiry and decision making.
9. Establish a growing presence on the national and international scene in learning from and contributing to the knowledge base about how to improve literacy and numeracy achievement.

The proposition was how to mobilize trilevel reform engagement in improvement – the school and community, the district, and the government. We undertook to proactively use the change knowledge – what we call “capacity building with a focus on results” – to achieve major results within a short period of time. Some schools and districts were already moving in this direction – in this sense they were ahead of the government – but the new goal was to have system-wide change in all districts and school authorities.

The Secretariat is committed to fostering inquiry and identification of effective practices. This is reflected in our mission to challenge ourselves, educators, and the community to seek out best thinking and build upon effective practices to maximize student achievement in literacy and numeracy. One initiative along these lines – the one we report here – was to identify what is known on the ground about district-wide reform. We set out to identify districts that a) had seemed to have sound strategies at work, and b) were getting results as indicated by trends in EQAO assessments. What we wanted to know was what was going on under different conditions as districts went about this difficult and important work. The district case studies reported in this series are part of our strategic approach to inquiry in which we derive lessons from Ontario’s education system on an ongoing basis and report these findings and learning back to Ontario’s educators to inform practice and contribute to improvement. We know that together we can make a significant difference for student achievement through unlocking potential for learning.

The Effective District Strategies project began in summer 2005. The purpose of the project was to identify districts in Ontario that are demonstrating improvements in literacy and numeracy and to evaluate the strategies, actions, and outcomes associated with such improvements. We identified eight districts from 72 districts in Ontario for the project. The eight districts were deliberately selected to represent a wide range of sizes, locations, and contexts. In terms of student populations, three of the districts are small (fewer than 500 students in Grade 6 in 2004–05), three are medium sized (1000–2000 Grade 6 students), and two are large (over 3000 students in Grade 6). However, the student numbers only tell part of the story. The districts with small student numbers cover large geographical areas, with the challenges of remoteness and dispersed communities. The large districts contain concentrated urban and suburban communities, with diverse populations combining areas of affluence in close proximity to disadvantaged communities.

Ontario has French, English, public, and Catholic education systems. The eight districts were selected across each of these systems. One district is French-language and seven are English-language. Five districts are within the Catholic education system, whereas three are in the public system. All eight are publicly funded. All eight districts are committed to raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy and have demonstrated improvement over time. The provincial goal is to have 75 per cent of students at or above the provincial standard in EQAO Grade 6 assessments. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat is working in partnership with boards across Ontario to achieve this result. This project is part of The Secretariat's work to unlock potential for learning by sharing successful practices. The project has, however, not just focused on high-achieving boards, but also on growth and improvement in both lower- and higher-performing boards. This has enabled The Secretariat to identify effective practices for districts at different stages of improvement and achievement levels and to learn lessons across the range of contexts and experiences in Ontario.

The case study districts do not offer exact blueprints for success, but rather provide concrete examples of what effective strategies look like in practice. The project's research questions focused on three key areas of enquiry. We list these here to

enable the reader to reflect on how you would answer these questions in relation to your own context:

1. District's Strategy and Actions

- What is the district's approach to improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy?
- What is the main purpose driving this approach and what are the goals to be achieved?
- What strategies and actions are in place on a district-wide basis?
- What is the structure and operation of the district to support a focus on student achievement?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of key individual postholders within the district?

2. Connections Between District and Schools

- Has a shared focus on literacy and/or numeracy been fostered across all schools?
- At the school level, what initiatives and actions have taken place to improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy?
- What is the relationship between the district and schools in supporting literacy/numeracy improvements?
- How does the district challenge all schools to improve?
- What types of support do schools receive from the district?
- How is professional learning shared within and across schools?

3. Impact of District's Strategies and Actions and Future Developments

- Overall, how effective is the district's approach to improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy?
- What specific strategies and actions have been most effective?
- What have been the main difficulties encountered and how have these been addressed?
- How can improvements become sustainable?
- What further developments are planned or required to improve student achievement district-wide?
- What has been the key learning for the district in improving student achievement in literacy and/or numeracy?
- What lessons have been learned of relevance to other districts and/or for province-wide reform?

The research method involved visits to each of the eight districts. Interviews were conducted with members of the senior administrative teams (directors of education and supervisory officers/superintendents) and other relevant central staff (e.g., curriculum co-ordinators, consultants, coaches). A sample of school principals was interviewed in each district. School visits involving further discussion with principals and with teachers and other staff, plus classroom observations, were also undertaken. Through this approach, the project attempted to gather views from the central office and from the school, and to compare and contrast these perspectives. We were interested in exploring the connections between districts and schools in system improvement and the ways in which effective districts foster collective commitment and responsibilities for student achievement.

Across the eight districts, we identified 12 key components of effective practices that link to four broad strategic areas (see Figure 1). Our focus in this project was on effective district-wide strategies for both system and school improvement. The 12 components are relevant at district, school, and classroom levels. Indeed, in effective districts these features form an interactive framework for action, district-wide and within schools.

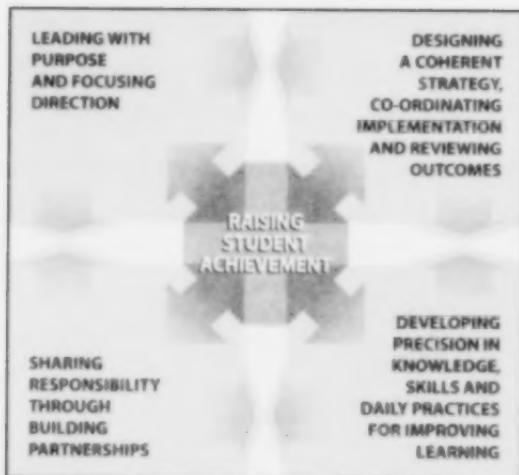


Figure 1

One strategic area is *Leading with Purpose and Focusing Direction*. This area encompasses three key components. The first component is *leadership for learning*, which involves both individual and collective leadership to support improvement in professional learning and student learning. The second component is establishing *vision and shared focus* on student achievement as the priority. The third component is ensuring that a sense of moral purpose informs strategies and practices to unlock potential for improvement. This *moral purpose* includes the overall importance of education for economic and social development plus daily practices to support students' character, emotional, and social development.

Another strategic area is *Designing a Coherent Strategy, Co-ordinating Implementation, and Reviewing Outcomes*. This includes four key components. The first component is the development of a *coherent overarching strategy* for student achievement in literacy and numeracy. The second component is the *identification and allocation of resources* prioritized to the system focus on improved student achievement. A third component is the effective *organization* at district, school, and classroom levels to support student achievement, including attention to the roles and responsibilities of staff. The fourth component is the routine use of system and school-level *monitoring and review* of targets and outcomes achieved, reviewing progress to inform future action and holding to account schools and system leaders for improvement.

The next strategic area is *Developing Precision in Knowledge, Skills, and Daily Practices for Improving Learning*. This involves three key components. One component is attention to *capacity building* to extend professional learning, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy instruction, assessment for learning, classroom management, and instructional leadership. A second component is careful attention to *curriculum development, instruction, and interventions* to improve teaching and learning for all students system-wide and within schools. The third component is the regular use and understanding of data at the system and school level and the development of assessment literacy within schools to ensure instruction is informed by data about student learning and progress.

The final strategic area is *Sharing Responsibility through Building Partnerships*. This involves two key components. First is the fostering of *partnerships* within the system, for example, between central office and schools and across schools, and with parents, communities, and other organizations and agencies to build shared involvement in, and responsibilities for, supporting student learning. This requires the second component of clear *communication*, where a consistent message about raising student achievement is communicated widely, frequently, and with a sense of urgency.

While each of the above four broad areas can be explored in isolation, for example, focusing on leadership or on instruction, it is their combined strength that is vital. As Figure 1 indicates, each is a piece of the jigsaw of unlocking the potential for district-wide reform. A district that is strong on only one or two of these components will not achieve its full potential. It is important to note that the components are not mutually exclusive; rather, they interact and influence each other in practice.

In the *Unlocking Potential for Learning* series, we will be publishing selected case studies from the districts involved in this project to share their experiences, strategies, and practices for raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Unlocking the potential for learning through district-wide reform involves several requirements. First, the overall system – the province – must expect, foster, and support districts to take focused action. Second, it is necessary, as we have shown in this initiative, to identify cases in which specific strategies are in place so that we can examine what they look like in practice. Even with this increased precision, it is difficult to detail specifically how to make all districts effective, as there are no universal blueprints for success. The combination of strategies and the influence of

local contexts, needs, and experiences will vary in the implementation and outcomes of similar practices in different contexts. To a certain extent, districts must identify and review their own particular current state and their future development, drawing on the best knowledge from evidence of successful practices locally and beyond. This could include comparing a district's existing strategies and actions against the 12 components identified above and reviewing the examples provided in the case study report.

We know from past research that neither top-down, prescriptive strategies nor bottom-up, site-based strategies alone work. What is needed is a blend of the two. In trilevel reform, the district, as the mid part of the "tri", is in a vital position to reconcile and harness top-down and bottom-up forces needed for large-scale reform. In essence, this is what unlocking potential is all about.

Carol Campbell, Michael Fullan, and Avis Glaze
Series Editors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Board Profile

The Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française du Centre-Est (CECLFCE) has a total enrolment of close to 17,000 students in 37 elementary schools (almost 11,000 of whom are in Grades 1 to 6), six intermediate schools, and eight secondary schools, making it the largest network of Catholic French-language schools in Canada. Founded in 1998, the CECLFCE covers a vast territory of 35,615 kilometres including municipalities in the regions of Ottawa, Brockville, Merrickville, Carleton Place, and Pembroke.

Data Collection

Data collection included: interviews with the board's senior leadership team, including the director and superintendents, and other key board staff, such as a central academic coach for literacy and numeracy and the head of evaluation services. Three school principals were also interviewed. A review of board documents, including improvement plans, evaluation materials and reports, and EQAO data was also completed.

Key Features of the School Board's Overall Approach for Improvement

The school board's focus is on:

- raising student achievement for all students in literacy and numeracy
- consistently re-enforcing and sharing this priority in board-wide messages from the director
- supporting the establishment and growth of professional learning communities in all schools focused on raising student achievement through analysis of data, use of research-based teaching strategies, engagement in professional learning within and across schools, and implementation of strategies for student achievement

- engaging parents and the community to promote awareness of French-language education issues
- developing a learner-centred leadership model with professional development and support for the role of principals as instructional leaders
- using coaching at the system and school levels to support sustained improvements in practices
- establishing, implementing, and reviewing both a multi-year board plan and annual plans with SMART goals and ambitious targets for improvement (goals and targets are also reflected in school improvement plans)
- developing assessment for learning and use of student data to inform instructional practices and system plans
- using student exit profiles to inform instructional strategies and learning outcomes for all students
- modelling effective practices and working closely with board personnel, including superintendents, instructional specialists, principals, and teachers, to support improvement
- supporting a collaborative, systematic approach to student achievement targets, involving superintendents, principals, and school teams
- fostering professional accountability of all staff for student achievement
- implementing strategies for literacy and numeracy in all schools, for example, early reading interventions and compulsory blocks of reading time
- allocating resources at board and school levels to support development of professional learning communities, coaching, and learner-centred leadership
- using evaluation and review of data to monitor progress, identify needs, and inform planning and practices

Case Study Report

1. Board Context and Performance

The Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française du Centre-Est (CECLFCE) has a total enrolment of close to 17,000 students in 37 elementary schools (almost 11,000 of whom are in Grades 1 to 6), six intermediate schools, and eight secondary schools, making it the largest network of Catholic French-language schools in Canada. Founded in 1998, the CECLFCE covers a vast territory of 35,615 kilometres, including municipalities in the regions of Ottawa, Brockville, Merrickville, Carleton Place, and Pembroke. Students in this board are entitled to French-language education under Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Ontario Education Act*.

The board's vision is to have "students who are filled with enthusiasm for learning, for following their dreams and for building a better world". Its mission is to "equip students for academic achievement, personal growth, citizenship and commitment to their Catholic faith and the francophone community".

To achieve this mission, the board has established a student exit profile focused on the student's growth in terms of academic achievement, Catholic faith, French-language skills, and career plans. This profile specifies the key attitudes, values, and skills students from Junior Kindergarten through high school need to develop to continue growing throughout life. It also incorporates accountability in terms of targeted objectives.

Most elementary schools offer accredited child care services for preschool and school-age children along with a full-time program for four-year-olds. Other programs include the Breakfast Program, the Parent Support Program, reading programs, a homework support program (SOS Devoirs), personalized instruction (at two schools), and intensive support for special education.

To prepare children adequately for the working world, the board offers a broad range of work placement programs, including cooperative education programs and the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program, which help students acquire some of the work readiness skills they will need to ensure personal and professional success.

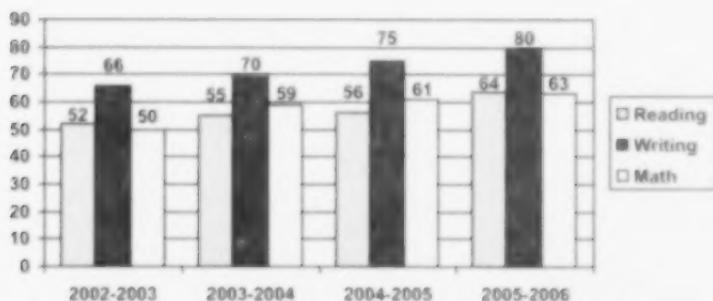
The board also offers programs to enhance students' faith as Catholics, notably the Christian faith and arts integration program (*Intégration arts et foi chrétienne*), and programs to support their French-language skills, such as the children and teens radio station (*Radio Enfant-Ado*).

The board's Grade 3 students surpassed the provincial standard in reading and writing on the 2006 Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) tests. Moreover, the board's Grade 6 students surpassed the provincial standard in reading, writing, and mathematics on the 2006 EQAO assessments.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has set level 3 in the Ontario Curriculum as the provincial standard. Level 3 represents a high level of performance in relation to provincial learning outcomes. The results for the board's Grade 3 and Grade 6 students from 2002–03 to 2005–06 are shown in the figures below:

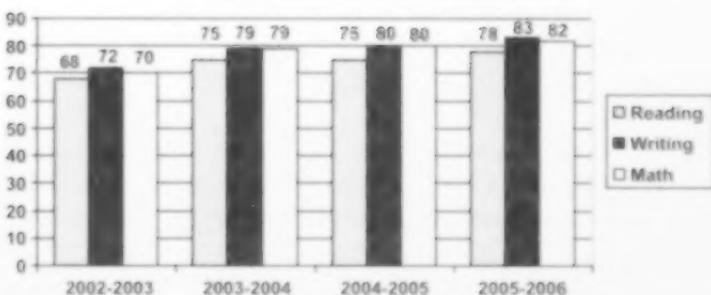
GRADE 3: PERCENTAGE OF CECLFCE STUDENTS AT LEVELS 3 AND 4 IN PROVINCIAL ASSESSMENTS

| Grade 3 | 2002–03 | 2003–04 | 2004–05 | 2005–06 | Percentage Point Difference from 2002–03 to 2005–06 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Reading | 52 | 55 | 56 | 64 | 12 |
| Writing | 66 | 70 | 75 | 80 | 14 |
| Math | 50 | 59 | 61 | 63 | 13 |



**GRADE 6: PERCENTAGE OF CECLFCE STUDENTS AT
LEVELS 3 AND 4 IN PROVINCIAL ASSESSMENTS**

| Grade 6 | 2002-03 | 2003-04 | 2004-05 | 2005-06 | Percentage Point Difference from 2002-03 to 2005-06 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Reading | 68 | 75 | 75 | 78 | 10 |
| Writing | 72 | 79 | 80 | 83 | 11 |
| Math | 70 | 79 | 80 | 82 | 12 |



2. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted with the Director of Education, Lise Bourgeois, two superintendents, François Massé and Marie-France Ricard, and other key central board staff, Sylvie Tremblay, Sylvie Rochon, and Mario Lajoie. Three school principals were also interviewed. A review of board documents, including improvement plans, evaluation materials and reports, and EQAO data was also completed.

3. Board's Approach to Improving Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy

Presentation of the Board's Initiatives

The board's 2003–04 annual report presents a list of practices that have been put in place to promote the success of all students. According to the report, 19 schools participated in a Senior Kindergarten literacy program, with volunteer parents, grandparents, and members of the community visiting the schools to read to students. An early childhood literacy program (for students in Grades 1 to 3) and a literature for kids program (Grades 4 to 6) are delivered in 12 schools. In addition, 154 students in 23 schools took part in the reading and writing early intervention program (*Intervention préventive en lecture-écriture*). Of these, 78 became "independent readers and writers". An explicit reading instruction program and an intensive reading support program are also offered in 14 of the board's schools.

The student exile profile appears to be the backdrop for all the pedagogical interventions underlying these programs. This profile is described in the annual report as a "tool for focusing energies on a common vision and action plan to guarantee the excellence of [their] educational services and equip students for success".

The 2004–07 board plan underscores how important it is for teaching staff to take responsibility for the targets specified in student profiles. The plan details targets for overall improvement in student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics at both Grade 3 and Grade 6. All students are expected to improve their reading, writing, and math results. The proposed methods for achieving these targets are preparing school and class profiles, developing a plan to integrate learning technologies, and making maximum use of the student achievement monitoring system.

According to the board, the targeted outcomes on the provincial EQAO assessments will be achieved through systematic study of the development of math strategies, the preparation and implementation of initiatives to recruit teaching staff, particularly math teachers, the analysis of data, and the training of principals in learner-centred leadership. Implementing the learner-centred leadership model will play a major role in achieving these targets on the EQAO assessments. This learner-centred leadership model, which is tied to the board's accountability framework, provides direction for improving student achievement by proposing strategies defined by best

practices and by introducing professional learning communities. Training principals in this leadership model incorporates:

- development and improvement in target skills;
- professional, personal, and institutional growth;
- improvement in individual and group achievement; and
- sustained professional transformation among leaders.

The board has adopted this learner-centred leadership approach as a catalyst to improve student achievement. According to DuFour and Eaker (2004), "the quality of staff training will be judged not by the number of teachers and administrators who participated in continuous education programs or their perceived value, but rather by their success in changing the way they teach for the greater benefit of the students" (p. 291).

Since September 2003, a specialist in the monitoring of learning has been available to coach school principals in setting up professional learning communities within their schools. According to the data in the specialist's 2003–04 comprehensive report, 26 out of a possible 39 elementary school principals took advantage of this coaching. The report describes interviews conducted at three of the schools that took part during the 2003–04 school year. A summary of the interviews describes celebrating success in schools where achievement improved and where professional communication is the prerogative of the teaching staff. The teachers recognize their contribution to student learning. To explain cases where no improvement is recorded, the specialist observed that "the feeling of having contributed was less apparent among teachers who met less frequently or who had yet to see any improvement in student achievement" (p. 7). The report's recommendations stressed the need for principals to formulate a clear vision of collaborative teams and analyse student results in light of the quality of instruction.

In its 2003–08 action plan, incorporated into the comprehensive report, the board made a commitment to "ensuring that effective pedagogical practices were implemented within professional learning communities in each of its schools" (p. 14). These practices are intended to ensure the completion of student exit profiles. Actions resulting from this commitment include operational planning for the school with collaborative teams, spot visits by the principal to identify best practices,

and funding to assist with setting up collaborative teams. At the end of the school year, a learner-centred tool will be used to analyse the school's experience implementing professional learning communities. In terms of literacy and numeracy, this assumes that the school has given priority to improved student achievement and to the creation of relevant improvement objectives. The harmonization of teaching practices, assessment of teaching strategies, and examination of effective pedagogical practices will also be required.

An analytical review of the 2004–05 school year examines the changes observed in the area of professional collaboration, evidence of improved student achievement, and the development of a sustainable professional learning community within a school. In addition, the review includes an evaluation of the school profile, strategies for improving training provided to principals and staff, and a description of the coaching principals received on implementing professional learning communities.

Establishing Professional Learning Communities

Within a professional learning community, it is the principal's role to create an organizational environment in which the school and its teaching staff can make a difference when it comes to improving results. The CECLFCE has developed a diagnostic tool (*Diagnostic pour mon école*) that requires the school's teaching staff and principal to assess the school's performance in terms of the curriculum, accountability, parent engagement, environment, collegiality, and professionalism. To improve students' academic achievement, this reflective process has to lead to a change in school practices, allowing schools to determine the effort required to make significant change to current practices. The goal is for teachers to use research-based teaching strategies, exchange information on successful practices, harmonize their teaching practices, analyse class profiles, diagnose results, and implement student improvement strategies.

In addition to this diagnostic tool, the board has implemented an evaluation process to identify the school's experience of introducing a professional learning community. To build a professional learning community, the school needs to submit an application for funding. The board has decided to allocate \$200,000 of its budget to elementary schools for meetings aimed at establishing a professional dialogue; in addition, school principals must in turn allocate part of their school budget to collaborative

teams. Moreover, in its budget allocations, the board has decided to decentralize certain funds such as those allocated to training, with a view to helping schools achieve the SMART objectives they set in relation to student achievement. This funding covers the cost of hiring supply teachers so that collaborative team meetings can be scheduled, as well as the cost of workshops for math, reading, writing, classroom management, parent communication, updating student and class profiles, and evaluation tools in relation to EQAO assessments. The school principal is responsible for defining priorities on the basis of the school's needs.

During supervisory meetings with the board superintendent, the school principal is required to report on the planning for improving student achievement in his or her school. Strategies and indicators for achieving results and targets are incorporated in the planning process. The principal also presents an action plan for creating a professional learning community. Monitoring mechanisms must be established with regard to improvement targets for reading, writing, and math classes. As part of his or her leadership role, the principal provides pedagogical supervision. To support student learning, the principal must be aware of whether the students in the school are learning, what steps are being taken for those who are not learning, what curriculum is being taught, and what assessment tasks are being administered. Formal or informal class visits by the principal help to identify best practices.

To help establish and develop professional learning communities within schools, the board has also created two positions for specialists in the monitoring of learning supervision to provide support to school principals and collaborative teams.

Improved Achievement Through Professional Learning Communities

Improving results across the board depends on implementation of professional learning communities. Staff training is tailored according to grade level, and the board provides support. Establishing professional learning communities is considered to be dependent on leadership from the principal who is expected to have a significant impact on creating and maintaining an environment conducive to learning. Such an environment is considered to be a determining factor in the academic achievement of all students. Within such a learning environment, the principal has to foster a sense of belonging and encourage commitment to the board's vision and specific mandate.

As a result, the school principal must:

- make parents and the community aware of the issues associated with French-language education;
- establish ties with francophone organizations;
- be visible and accessible to teaching staff, parents, and the community; and
- encourage teacher and community participation in the school's decision-making process and strategic directions.

Implementing professional learning communities is based on the development of specific skills and professional growth, including:

- prescribed areas for skills development;
- opportunities to reflect on practices;
- group diagnostic activities;
- training processes for a professional learning community;
- training context integrated into the school-work environment; and
- integration of research-based evaluation and assurance processes.

The operationalization of these leadership practices translates into:

- promotion of achievement for all students;
- consistency in terms of the curriculum, teaching strategies, and learning assessment;
- harmonization of effective pedagogical practices;
- support for teaching staff; and
- support for parents.

4. Board Practices to Support Achievement

The following section presents concrete examples of practices implemented to improve student achievement. They include practices implemented by the central administration, by all the board's schools, or by specific schools only.

Below is a description of the process for supporting improved student achievement, as established by senior administrators:

- Within the board, the director focuses on literacy and stresses the importance of strategies. Senior administrators/superintendents send out a consistent message. The supervision of learning in literacy is everyone's responsibility.
- A systematic approach leads to consistent, harmonized practices, and must be applied to all professional learning communities, which are long-lasting components that facilitate interventions outlined in school action plans.

Board personnel and school principals have stressed how essential it is for teaching staff to receive support for improving student achievement. Although such support can be provided through training, it is mainly delivered through coaching. Any training must be followed up with coaching to ensure the implementation of systemic approaches and strategies. Furthermore, professional development needs to be oriented towards improving targeted results. With that in mind, the central administration has added resources so that senior administrators and principals can provide more thorough supervision of learning. According to board personnel, leadership coaching has allowed school principals to re-assume responsibility for pedagogical leadership within the schools. In addition to their management responsibilities, principals now take on the role of pedagogical leader.

Teachers and principals have noted that the increased presence and visibility of school principals at various pedagogical meetings, in the classroom and in the staff room, have had an impact on practices. As one school principal said:

In the schools, common reading assessments were administered to students in Grades 1 to 6. Teachers would then meet by grade and analyse student achievement. Then in teams they would identify strategies, ways of improving certain skills. They therefore came to a consensus on what was involved in teaching reading in the primary

and junior divisions. At subsequent meetings discussions turned to guided reading, shared reading, independent reading, reading to students, reading circles, and reading aloud. We practised together and came to realize that it was one thing to know that this was important, but we also needed to model what it was all about for the students. We needed to decide on a strategy. The result is that all students from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6 now have the same pictograms and the same reading strategies.

According to school principals, the greatest impact of this new approach from the board is that now everyone is speaking the same language. Everyone is talking about pedagogy. There is less competition among principals because they are all focused on improving student achievement.

New Practices Aimed at Supporting Professional Development

Board personnel noted the various professional development programs available to teachers. Particularly worthy of note is the fact that trainers visit the schools to work with teachers and help them develop their teaching style and implement the curriculum. In addition, certain schools have a Reading Recovery™ program in place, whereby teachers work with six-year-old students on reading and writing. Pedagogical leaders are also on hand to coach new teaching staff with regard to classroom management; in addition, they provide coaching on effective teaching practices and in order to ensure the development of literacy and numeracy skills.

Improving Teaching Practice and Learner-Centred Leadership

The person responsible for providing training on learner-centred leadership coaches school principals as required. This coaching may be done in meetings with principals at elementary or secondary school workshops. At elementary workshops, the trainer prepares activities with the relevant superintendent. The trainer then discusses supervision practices with the supervision team consisting of two superintendents. Principals may request coaching along with training sessions for teachers at their school.

According to school principals, the elementary workshops provide an opportunity for principals to discuss and experience issues they have to deal with, for example, data-gathering activities. As one school principal stated:

Elementary workshops are monthly meetings attended by all elementary school principals. Two principals are always given an opportunity to share pedagogical projects and ways they introduced professional learning communities at their schools. This provides us with an opportunity to see what is being done elsewhere and what works in other schools. We can then go back to our own schools with new ideas.

Moreover, the person in charge of learner-centred leadership training conducts action-research sessions at these workshops with a group of school principals, in addition to serving as an adviser to superintendents on policy issues at the board level.

Literacy and Numeracy Practices

According to board personnel, greater importance is now being placed on literacy within school communities. The board's schools have a range of practices in place:

- systematic training on explicit teaching of reading at the secondary level
- setting up reading mentor systems among students, for example, having Grade 6 students reading to younger children
- increased harmonization of practices across schools supported by the work of the collaborative teams
- displaying reference material on school walls that reflects the ministry program for the teaching of literacy and numeracy – word banks, problem-solving strategies, and meta-linguistic strategies – leading students to pose questions and learn how to improve their literacy and numeracy
- compulsory in-school reading periods during which students are asked to set aside what they are doing and read for 15 minutes (other initiatives include book of the month, books that girls like, books that boys like, and reading competitions)
- reorganizing libraries, setting up reading corners in classrooms, and organizing book clubs
- use of student data to inform instruction and development of assessment for learning

Partnerships

According to board personnel, the volunteer system is alive and well in the schools. Large numbers of volunteers are taking time to share their life experiences with the students. These volunteers come from various backgrounds; they may be parents, grandparents, business people, or employees in public sector organizations.

Parent engagement is supported in a range of ways. Of interest is a newly developed approach to student data using software which provides parents with access to data concerning their child's performance.

The board has also worked hard to foster and maintain productive relationships with the Association des enseignantes et enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO). Members of AEFO are, for example, invited to attend meetings with the director, senior team, and principals to discuss the board's student achievement goals and strategies. AEFO was the main partner, working with the board, for organizing and hosting a major event about professional learning communities and the impact on student learning, which involved over 200 participants. This work was further developed through six regional one-day institutes on professional learning communities, developed in collaboration between the board and AEFO. A major symposium on assessment, for between 200 to 300 teachers, is scheduled for spring 2007.

5. Board Implementation to Improve Achievement

According to board personnel, the board has adopted a systematic approach focusing on the consistency and harmonization of school supervision practices. The purpose of this approach has been to identify common practices and assess their impact on student learning. To meet the needs of schools, superintendents have worked with collaborative teams to identify various needs such as workshops for elementary and secondary school principals. These workshops allowed principals to work in collaboration with superintendents in order to discuss issues, strategies, and needs, and then identify the most pressing ones:

How do we address issues regarding grade levels or small schools?

The board has done a considerable amount of work to identify areas with the greatest needs. Once such areas have been identified, efforts can then be made to determine what resources are required.

The central administration meets these needs in various ways, including differentiated staffing and targeted strategies such as intensive reading strategies and explicit instruction.

The central administration has also identified targets within various priorities – namely, improvement targets with respect to the board's strategic plan. These targets go beyond student achievement and address improved motivation, specifically through student, parent, and staff satisfaction surveys.

6. The Leadership Role of the Director of Education and Key Personnel

According to the director of education, her role is to promote the importance of literacy and numeracy strategies:

It's essential for people to believe that this is important and for the message to be consistent. So conveying a consistent message is vital, but then an important part of my role is to encourage collaborative mechanisms among the various stakeholders ... obviously the primary stakeholders for me are senior administrators. We also want to see such collaboration among the superintendents who supervise the schools. So, learning, or the supervision of learning, clearly falls within the realm of the superintendents, but the importance of improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy is everyone's responsibility.

According to board personnel, senior administrators are the ones who are primarily responsible for determining how the outcomes are achieved. Everyone is aware of the desired outcomes and targets; however, senior administrators are primarily responsible for ensuring that everyone is aware of the outcomes, that each school sets outcomes and has an improvement plan in place, and that each class has a class profile along with improvement targets. Regular collaborative meetings involving school and board staff are held.

For administrative messages to translate into concrete action, central administration ensures there is an action plan, including objectives targeting specific interventions. For schools to reach these objectives, the central administration ensures that they have the necessary resources to implement selected intervention measures. In short,

the administration ensures that each student develops in each area of the student exit profile (academic achievement, Catholic faith, French-language skills, and career plans) alongside the emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Each student must be able to develop literacy and numeracy skills to function well in society.

7. School and School Board Connections to Support Student Achievement

This section describes the ties that exist between the board and its schools in the following areas:

Common Initiatives to Improve Achievement

According to board personnel, school culture is in the process of being redefined. The concept of accountability has evolved. The board and the schools as well are starting to talk about professional accountability, whereby every individual assumes responsibility for the results. For example, teachers within collaborative teams are now setting SMART objectives. According to school principals, these teams are demanding more and more from teachers, in line with central administration requirements. Principals are therefore asking teachers to prepare class profiles and to gather and analyse data. With modeling from the central administration, what is happening in the schools can be improved, creating consistency and continuity across all levels within the board. As one school principal noted:

Perhaps one of the most important things to bear in mind is that whatever the board does, whether in terms of language planning, pedagogical services, or access to board services, everything is done cooperatively. There is a common thread between our school principals, our superintendents, our director of education and our teachers.

The principals stressed the importance of schools receiving a broad range of support from the board. This support allows schools to set objectives in line with the board's vision but also to work towards these objectives in keeping with the schools' special needs and features. Each school can therefore progress at its own pace. Schools receive support, training, and funding from the central administration. In the area of training, for example, literacy and numeracy leaders are present in each school. Outside resources are also sometimes enlisted to assist schools. Teachers at some schools, for example, have received training on the topic of literacy and boys.

As for budgets, schools have received funds for the purchase of reading material. Funds have also been allocated to cover the cost of hiring supply teachers so that teachers can attend meetings, and student groupings can be organized by performance level with assistance from a teacher for up to three one-hour sessions per week. Also, funding for cultural activities has helped boost language planning efforts. Some schools have been equipped with tools such as media centres where work on oral communication, reading, and the cultural component is pursued.

According to the principals, support from the central administration has helped foster a cooperative culture among the teaching staff, which has become the preferred vision and approach. Principals no longer feel they are working on their own but feel they can now count on the entire school team for support. The school improvement plans, to be developed on the basis of central administration improvement plans, have to include very specific objectives. Thanks to this collaborative culture, these objectives have been developed by all school members, not just the school principal. Objectives are established in reading, writing, and mathematics. Moreover, principals are able to share strategies with professional learning communities. There has therefore been ongoing sharing of strategies, which means that schools are now able to gather and assess their own data, and then change their approaches accordingly. The sharing of strategies is done differently from school to school. Many hold weekly and monthly meetings, by division and by grade. These frequent meetings allow principals and teachers to monitor student progress on a monthly basis and share best practices. In short, collaborative efforts by all members of the team and working with the data have proven to be very effective strategies.

Effective Communication Between Central Administration and Schools

According to board personnel, the approach adopted by the central administration works because there is a lot of openness and flexibility. Furthermore, there is increased support, follow-up, and coaching in the schools. As one board member noted:

The pedagogical teams support the principals and teachers with the things that they want to implement. So, interventions by the central administration are more specific than interventions for the system as a whole... This results in a different relationship... people think of the central administration as a source of support.

Dialogue between the central administration and the school is on the rise. For example, the superintendents participate in workshops or collaborative team meetings. Superintendents meet with principals in small groups where one of the things they discuss is the operational plan targets. At these meetings, they look at what is being done in the collaborative teams. They try to see how this culture of cooperation works – what is counter-productive and what is helping.

According to the school principals, key features of the central administration's approach are teamwork, cooperation, data collection and evaluation, and the harmonization of all of these elements.

8. Lateral Capacity Building: Increasing Professional Exchanges Among Schools

In terms of increasing professional exchanges among schools, board personnel report that sector teams have been established – that is, with one principal responsible for organizing meetings of teachers from different schools and drawing up an agenda so that the teachers can talk about best practices and student recruitment and retention. These sector teams are teams of teachers from a single geographic area. Since the schools are similar in terms of the composition of their student population, they can find common strategies to improve student achievement. Electronic discussion forums have also been launched to enable teachers to share their concerns, issues, challenges, or evaluations. They can also participate in educational talks, which represent another opportunity to share educational materials. It is also important to mention the work of one educational consultant at the board who has created a special education network. This network has enabled resource teachers to talk about the difference between adaptations in the classroom and modified programs in the classroom.

The board has also led, in partnership with AEFO, to the establishment and development of professional learning events for schools both in their own board and across Ontario. This has included a symposium focusing on the relationship between professional learning communities to student achievement, which was followed by regional workshops. A symposium on assessment is also being planned for spring 2007.

9. Evaluation and Effectiveness of the Implemented Practices

With respect to the strategies and measures implemented at the board level, board personnel noted that different tools exist for collecting data, including satisfaction surveys, individual school profiles, and demographic profiles that help to pinpoint school clienteles. These tools therefore allow for differentiated applications. Teachers also analyse data as a group. They meet to discuss student results in reading, writing, and mathematics. They may, for example, bring the work of one student to a collaborative team meeting and share it with the other teachers. They can then get feedback from the team about the needs of a particular student and the strategies that should be implemented to help the student move to the next level. Many teachers have also developed an interest in data analysis – that is, they are trying to determine the impact of strategies and resources.

With respect to effective strategies, the principals reported that there is a continuous sharing of strategies, which enables them to subsequently collect and evaluate their own data, and then change their approaches accordingly. This sharing of strategies is done differently depending on the school: many of them hold weekly and monthly meetings by division and by grade. These frequent meetings enable principals and teachers to follow their students on a monthly basis and share best practices.

In short, according to the principals, one of the most important aspects of improved achievement is the sharing of pedagogical ideas with a focus on student achievement. Developing cooperation among all the members of the collaborative team and working with data are very effective strategies.

The board has recognized that they need to examine data analysis more closely. Teachers require training to enable them to work with data and use data to decide which practices are the most likely to improve student achievement. The board is developing the use of software to support access to, and analysis of, student achievement data.

A key indicator of effectiveness is the high level of performance achieved overall by the board in EQAO assessments. The provincial goal is to have 75 per cent or more students at or above the provincial standard. CECLFCE has already achieved this in all subject areas (reading, writing, and mathematics) at Grade 6 and also for Grade 3 writing. CECLFCE is currently one of the highest achieving boards in Ontario.

In terms of practices that have not been effective, board personnel mentioned situations where the principal did not understand his or her role or the steps involved in creating professional learning communities, which created confusion. These principals required more direct guidance, with regard to their role and their strategies for communicating with their staff. Principals must all know exactly which area needs to be worked on within their schools, because if they cannot articulate the objectives clearly, the work cannot be done effectively.

In terms of strategies that proved ineffective, board personnel emphasized that holding one-day workshops at the board for various stakeholders without any subsequent follow-up was unproductive; instead, training followed by periodic coaching in small groups or on an individual basis has been far more effective.

10. Challenges to Overcome

With respect to challenges, board personnel emphasized that there has to be a collective push towards the development of professional learning communities in each school. Although they have seen a change in perception at every level of the board where accountability is concerned, from senior management to teachers, not everyone has taken ownership of the concept of accountability. Some people are still reluctant to embrace the idea of taking responsibility for student learning. The challenge here is to enable everyone to take ownership of this idea.

Based on the latest analysis of EQAO results, there has been continuous improvement in reading, writing, and mathematics. Many teachers have developed an interest in data analysis – that is, they are interested in discovering the impact of strategies and resources. However, the cultural transformation that has taken place at the elementary level has not yet occurred to the same extent at the secondary level. Strategies or action plans for secondary schools will need to be developed in cooperation with the principals:

We need to have discussions with the secondary school principals and teaching staff: we need to talk about why things need to change, why things cannot continue the way they always have, why we need to consider each student ... we need to make people aware of each student's success. This is not a board requirement; this is not a ministry requirement. This is a trend. This is a strong trend in education ...

We are accountable for each of our students. That's where we should be investing.

To get this cultural transformation happening at the secondary level, the board has identified a need to focus on educational renewal at the secondary level, especially training in effective practices. Basic training must also be provided for teachers in order to give them a forum for dialogue and for discussing pedagogy together.

There are already subject-related collaborative teams, in mathematics for example, but multidisciplinary teams must also be created. There needs to be a renewal of pedagogical practices at the secondary level so that effective practices, especially classroom management, pedagogical strategies, and curriculum management, can be harmonized.

According to the principals, one of the most important challenges is to align teacher training with the work of the principals. Lead teachers need to receive the same training as principals. All members of the collaborative team need to speak the same language. To ensure consistency, tools need to be developed to determine which strategies are effective or ineffective.

Lastly, according to one staff member, all of the board's initiatives and strategies should be brought together in a single document that could be used by other boards.

11. Sustainability of Improvements

With respect to the sustainability of improvements in student achievement, board personnel feel that a more cohesive budget strategy is needed – that is, ongoing funding to support the initiatives that are implemented. This must be given priority. In addition, once secondary school teachers have begun a cultural transformation based on cooperation and have developed leadership abilities, they will have other needs. These new needs must then be heard so that new initiatives can be identified.

To support sustainable improvement in achievement, exchanges between teachers at different schools must also be encouraged. New ways of supervising schools will need to be found, and thought must be given to principal succession planning – that is, to giving more information to future leaders, increasing their awareness, and equipping them so that they can sustain these improvements down the road.

12. Future Directions

With respect to the future, board personnel emphasized the importance of developing a plan for the future that is based on solid data and a vision of education. This will include further development of approaches for accessing, analysing, and using data about student learning and progress.

13. Lessons Learned to Improve Achievement

With respect to the lessons that can be learned with respect to improving literacy and numeracy, board personnel reported an enormous amount of sharing of practices, not only between schools within one board, but also between different school boards. According to the principals, all school staff, from the principal to the teachers, felt involved in this process. Everyone was included in the dialogue and everyone felt involved, which is what made the difference.

From the principals' point of view, the lessons that could be shared with other boards to support improvements in literacy and numeracy have to do with a systemic approach and training for all teachers. For example, teachers need training in reading and writing assessment and there is a need for planning and evaluation in these areas. According to the principals, professional learning communities provide them with the possibility of carrying out the board's mission and engaging in concerted action from different perspectives. However, concerted action cannot happen without appropriate resourcing.

A principal noted that the schools are now much more aware that they must take charge without waiting for solutions to come from somewhere else; they must make use of all of the resources available to them to enable each student to achieve.

Some board personnel also emphasized the fact that it is important to ensure that, when a new vision or expectation is presented, the message is really understood. Ideas must be articulated very clearly. There must also be opportunities for people to talk with each other to develop a shared understanding of the vision and the desired outcomes, because that is what will ensure that the initiatives taken by the board actually work.

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